ThinkingEngine

Socratic Dialogue Platform

What 'Think Critically' Actually Means (And What It) Tj ET BT /F1 20

A Framework for Teaching Real Critical Thinking

þÿFive specific intellectual moves that constitute critical thinking: þÿidentifying assumptions, spotting gaps, evaluating evidence, tracing þÿconsequences, and considering alternatives. Includes classroom þÿexamples and before/after comparison.

FREE RESOURCE

What's Inside:

- Classroom-ready Socratic prompts
- Teacher-friendly formatting
- Follow-up questions included
- No prep required - use with any curriculum
- Built for K-12 IB, AP & critical thinking

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What Critical Thinking Actually Requires

þÿCritical thinking is not one skill. It's a cluster of specific intellectual moves, each requiring different mental
þÿwork. Here are the five that matter most.

1. Identifying Assumptions - Including Your Own

þÿEvery argument rests on assumptions. Some are stated. Most aren't. Critical thinking means making assumptions explicit
þÿand evaluating whether they're solid. Students who haven't been taught this think critically about other people's
þÿarguments but not their own. That's not critical thinking. That's advocacy.

2. Spotting What's Missing

þÿEvery source, every argument, every article omits things: relevant context, alternative explanations, contrary
þÿevidence, dissenting perspectives. Students who haven't been taught this think the job is done when they've read the
þÿtext. It's not. The job is figuring out what the text left out.

3. Evaluating Evidence Quality, Not Just Presence

þÿStudents often treat evidence like a math problem: more evidence = stronger argument. Critical thinking means asking:
þÿWhat kind of evidence is this? Personal anecdote? Correlation? Expert opinion? Systematic study? And: Does this
þÿevidence actually support the specific claim being made, or something adjacent? A student who cites three news
þÿarticles about climate change hasn't necessarily supported a claim about climate causes.

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4. Tracing Consequences

þÿIf this is true, what follows? And what follows from that? And what would have to be true for this claim to hold? þÿCritical thinkers run the implications forward and backward. They check whether a position is compatible with known þÿfacts, or whether it requires ignoring inconvenient evidence.

5. Considering Alternatives Seriously

þÿNot "considering alternatives" as a rhetorical move. Actually taking the strongest version of a competing view and þÿasking: What would it take for this to be right? This is what separates real reasoning from performances of reasoning.

What Critical Thinking Doesn't Mean

þÿCritical thinking is not disagreement. Students hear "critical" and confuse it with "negative." They find flaws þÿwithout identifying what the bias is, what evidence shows it's wrong, or what a less biased version would say. That's þÿnot critical thinking. That's cynicism performing as analysis.

þÿCritical thinking is not skepticism without direction. "Question everything" is advice, not instruction. Students who þÿtake it literally end up with paralysis or performative contrarianism. Real critical thinking is selective - it þÿapplies rigor where it matters most, not everywhere equally.

þÿCritical thinking is not showing what you know. The job is: What would change my mind? What evidence could show I'm þÿwrong? If you can't answer that, you haven't thought critically. You've thought confidently.

How to Actually Teach Critical Thinking

þÿBefore a text: Ask students to predict the argument. Give them the title, author, and publication. Ask: What is this þÿsource likely to argue? What position will it take? Then read. Compare prediction to reality. Notice: where did you þÿassume wrong? This is a critical thinking exercise disguised as a prediction exercise.

þÿDuring reading: Stop and ask what the source left out. Ask: What would a person who disagrees with this author say? þÿWhat evidence might they cite that this piece doesn't address? This trains the "what's missing" move. Students who þÿpractice this regularly start doing it automatically when they encounter new sources.

þÿAfter reading: Ask what would change the student's mind - not a rhetorical question, a real one. What would you need þÿto see to conclude this argument is wrong? What's the strongest evidence against it? Then have students compare their þÿanswer to the strongest counterargument they can find.

þÿOn written work: Mark specifically. Don't write "be more critical." Write: "You've assumed that X. Is that assumption þÿsolid? What would someone who disagrees point to?" The more specific your feedback, the more students learn.

The Assessment Problem

þÿHere is why "think critically" stays vague: it's harder to assess than knowledge. You can test whether a student knows þÿthe Industrial Revolution happened. You cannot easily test whether they can identify an assumption, spot what's þÿmissing, and evaluate evidence quality. Most standardized assessments test recall and surface-level analysis, not the þÿfive moves above.

þÿRubric-based assessment helps. If your rubric says "identifies and evaluates the central assumption" as a criterion, þÿstudents can meet it and you can score it. The move toward analytical rubrics with specific criteria makes this more þÿtractable. The deeper issue is that most teachers were never taught the five moves explicitly. Without explicit þÿmodeling, students are doing the same thing - trying to reverse-engineer critical thinking from a phrase that provides þÿno guidance.

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